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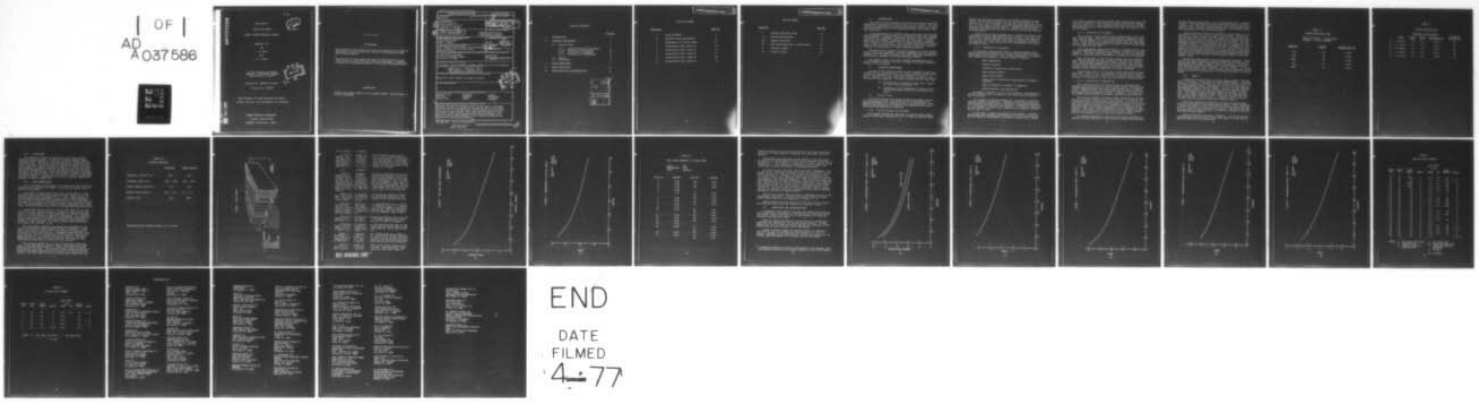

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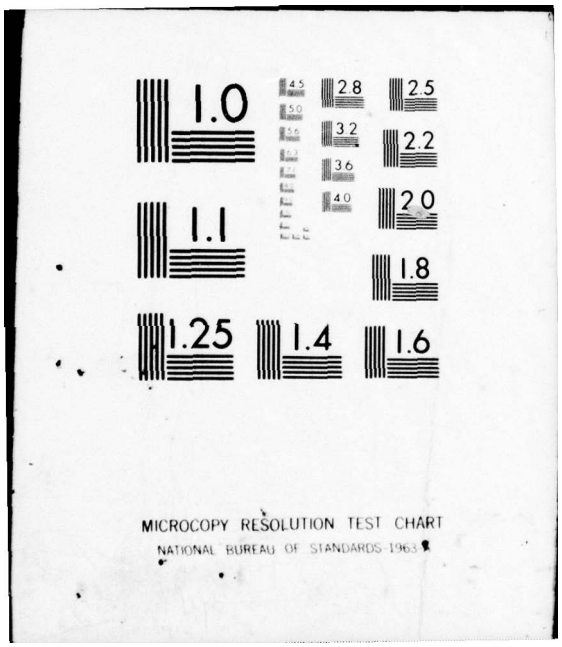
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ERC-7396-IV

FUEL CELL STACKS

FOURTH INTERIM TECHNICAL REPORT

FEBRUARY 1977

by

S. G. Abens

and

B. S. Baker

US ARMY MOBILITY EQUIPMENT
RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT COMMAND
Fort Belvoir, VA 22060

Contract No. DAAK02-74-C-0367

Project No. 7763580

ENERGY RESEARCH CORPORATION

3 Great Pasture Road

Danbury, Connecticut 06810

N O T I C E S

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1. REPORT NUMBER: ERC-7396-IV	2. GOVT ACCESSION NO.
3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER	
4. TITLE (and Subtitle): FUEL CELL STACKS.	5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED: Fourth Interim Technical Mar[illegible] — Aug[illegible] 76
6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER	
7. AUTHOR(s): S. G. Abens and B. S. Baker	8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s): DAAK02-74-C-0367
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS: ENERGY RESEARCH CORPORATION, 3 Great Pasture Road, Danbury, CT 06810	10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS: 7763580
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS: CHIEF, DEFENSE LOGISTICS AGENCY, DCAS Management Area, Bridgeport, 500 South Main Street, Stratford, CT 06497	12. REPORT DATE: Feb [illegible]77
	13. NUMBER OF PAGES: 28
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office): US ARMY MOBILITY EQUIPMENT Research & Development Command, Fort Belvoir, VA 22060	15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report): UNCLASSIFIED
	15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE

16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report)

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ERC-7396-4

17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)

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18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)

PHOSPHORIC ACID	SUBSTRATES	GRAPHITE
FUEL CELL	CATALYSTS	POLARIZATION
BIPOLAR PLATE	MATRIX	ELECTRODES

20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)

Production and testing of phosphoric acid fuel cell stacks is described. Electrodes, matrices, and bipolar gas distribution plates with an active area of 0.4 sq. ft. have been tested. Initial performance of 10- and 35-cell stacks has been obtained. Some stacks have been operated for over 2,000 hours at 300F, and tolerance to CO has been demonstrated. Life testing of stacks has been impeded by lack of complete gastightness and deterioration of gas diffusion plates.

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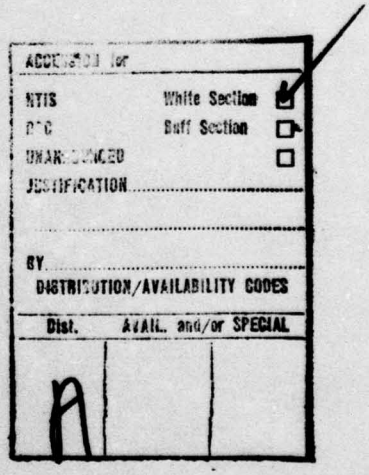

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1. INTRODUCTION

The third interim technical report on this program described construction and testing of the first 15 10-cell stacks. The modifications undertaken in component manufacture, which were necessary because some critical raw materials became unavailable, were also described.

In the evaluation of 10-cell stacks constructed with the modified components, voltage decay and evidence of gas cross leakage were observed. Subsequent inspection of stacks indicated deterioration of the modified bipolar plate and edge seals. Further modifications in plate processing and stack assembly procedures were, therefore, undertaken. Minor modifications were also undertaken in the electrode and matrix processes; these were largely dictated by availability of vendor supplied materials.

The pilot plant capacity has been brought to a level considerably above that required to produce components for this program. However, only limited stockpiling has been undertaken pending determination of reasons for stack performance decay.

The present report describes component manufacturing and stack assembly processes, as well as stack test results obtained to date on this program.

2. COMPONENT MANUFACTURE

As part of the required effort on this program, we have developed a pilot production facility which, assuming minimal scrap, can produce components for the weekly assembly of 100 5 x 15" cells. However, the pilot plant has generally operated at only a fraction of this capacity. The major reasons for this have been

(1) difficulties in pinpointing the exact reasons for poor stack performance, and

(2) tightening of the dimensional tolerances for the bipolar plate resulting in a higher scrap rate.

2.1 Bipolar Plate

Since the Hercules H-resin has become unavailable, our efforts on bipolar plates have centered on the application of phenolformaldehyde (PF) molding resins in this component. This material was selected on the basis of its apparent acid resistance and high temperature stability.

2.1.1 Initial Testing of PF Resins

For initial evaluation, sections of bipolar plates molded with FF resins were immersed in H_3PO_4 at 350F for several weeks

without any observable dimensional or chemical instability (the initial testing was conducted with resin concentrations in the range of 22 to 26% by weight). Plates were also molded for small (2 x 2") cell tests (all ERC fuel cell component modifications are initially evaluated in small cells). Several of these plates underwent many thousands of hours of testing without any evidence of deterioration.

Conductivity of plates molded with PF resins was found to be comparable or better than obtained with H-resin. With resin content of 22%, voltage drop thru the plate at 100ASF was measured to be in the order of 0.004V, certainly an acceptable figure in our application. These resins are also considerably less expensive than H-resin.

2.1.2 Evaluation of Graphites

In the early work with PF resins it became apparent that molding conditions developed for H-resin did not yield satisfactory plates with PF resins. The critical parameters for compression molding with graphite have been found to include:

Mold temperature

Molding pressure

Top/bottom temperature differential

Rate of mold closure

Dwell time in mold

Dwell time in mold before application of pressure (preheat)

Type of graphite or mixture of graphites

Preform density (precompression)

In addition to these, we have the mechanical requirements of uniform preform density (weight per unit area) and die parallelism in the mold.

In an effort to improve moldability, we turned to modifications in graphite composition. Molding art with these has long included mixing several types of graphite to improve moldability, i.e., defect-free discharge from the mold. In general, a quantity of fine graphite is mixed with a coarser one to provide improved density and strength.

In our work, a number of graphites were tested. A mixture which gives good strength and moldability with PF resin and has, for the present, been adopted as standard, consists of 11 parts

of a coarse synthetic graphite (Asbury A-99, average particle size 50μ) and 4 parts of a fine natural graphite (Asbury 850, average particle size 0.6μ). This composition has been found to provide good moldability with resin concentrations over the range of 18 to 37% by weight.

2.1.3 Selection of PF Resins

All of the PF resins tested on this program were of the two-step, Novolac type. Materials included Resinox (Monsanto), Arofene (Ashland Chemical Co.) and Colloid Resin 8440 (Colloid Chemical). These resins are suitable for molding over the same temperature range that was employed for H-resin, and can be postcured in a few hours at 325-375F.

From information supplied by vendors, it appears that no significant chemical differences exist between the various materials employed. The major variables appear to be particle size and the amount of unreacted phenol remaining in the material as supplied.

Most of the work on the PF resins plates has been conducted with Ashland Arofene 890 (now replaced by Ashland with Arofene 889). More recently, Arofene 882, which contains even less unreacted phenol than Arofene 890, and Colloid 8440, which appears to have a finer particle size than the Arofene resins and gives somewhat better molding properties, have been evaluated.

Plates made with all of the above resins have shown similar mechanical, conductivity, and phosphoric acid resistance properties. The choice of the PF resins has, therefore, been mostly on the basis of moldability rather than final plate characteristics.

2.1.4 Evaluation of Composition

The initial work with PF resin plates was conducted with compositions containing 18 to 26% by weight resin. The main reason for experimentation over this range was the need to improve yield. Sections broken from these plates did not show signs of disintegration when immersed in H_3PO_4. However, in stacks built with these plates gradual performance degradation was observed.

Post mortem inspection of these stacks showed softening and swelling of plate corners around the fill hole. We believe this to be caused by lack of complete densification of the plate corners during molding because of the variable thickness of the plate (the mold comes to a stop on the completely densified web area, which is about 0.050" thick compared to 0.170" thickness in the corners). The acid is able to penetrate corners because of their porosity and to produce a reaction over the very large surface area of the powdered resin in the resin-graphite matrix.

The obvious approach for correcting the above condition appeared to be densification to the corners by adding more material

in this area to the preform, i.e. to mold plates with a "shaped" preform. This approach was pursued with some success; the plate corners did in fact show good resistance to H_3PO_4 in beaker immersion tests. However, molding plates with consistently acceptable dimensions was found to be difficult.

Another workable approach to producing plates which are impervious to acid is the use of high resin content. Plates containing over 30% by weight of resin appear to form corners which are not penetrated by the acid. The limiting condition for this approach is, of course, the conductivity of the plate. We have measured conductance thru plates having 18 to 37% by weight resin. As shown in Table I, voltage drops over 20mV at 100ASF, are not reached with resin concentrations below 35%. The figures in this table were obtained by clamping a 2 x 2 in. section of the plate between flat electrodes at 80 psi and measuring the voltage drop thru the plate under a direct current of 100 amperes/square foot. Contact to the plate was made with stackpole graphite electrode support paper.

We are currently molding plates containing 33% resin. These plates have been evaluated in stacks without any evidence of deterioration over several hundred hours of operation. The stacks have exhibited somewhat steeper voltage-current slopes than we have seen with lower resin contents. (4.5 vs. 3mV/A). It is not clear at the present time if the somewhat higher resistance of the plate contributes significantly to the higher apparent cell resistance.

2.2 Matrix

Production of Kynol fibers has been discontinued by American Kynol Corporation, a subsidiary of Carborundum Company. A similar material is offered by Nippon Kynol who is now the sole source for the blown phenolic fiber. Consequently, all of our matrices are now produced from the Japanese fibers. To date, we have received two 50-pound shipments of this material with no apparent differences in the quality (the material appears to be from the same lot). The fibers supplied by Nippon Kynol are of good quality with little "shot" (unblown resin). This has obviated the need for hand picking of the material to eliminate lumps, which was required with the material supplied by American Kynol.

The matrix manufacturing process has been continued essentially as described in the Third Interim Report. Minor variations in weight per unit area and final matrix thickness have been made mainly as an effort to improve stack sealing. The matrix density was also shown to have an effect on operating voltage of the cells (see Third Interim Report).

Matrix variations are shown in Table II. We do not see any evidence that there has been a major difference in stack performance between the various matrices.

TABLE I

VOLTAGE DROP THRU PLATE

Contact Pressure: 75 lbs sq/in.
Current: 2.7A DC (100ASF)

PLATE NO.	% RESIN	VOLTAGE DROP, mV
558	18	0.004
1641	22	0.006
2569	27	0.008
2491	33	0.018
2285	37	0.032

TABLE II

MATRIX SPECIFICATION

	CODE	MAT'L WT., G/2.2 SQ.FT. FIBER	RESIN	THICKNESS, in.	% POROSITY (CALCULATED)
A.	2 x 24/17	28	1.2	0.017	55
B.	3 x 24/24	42	1.2	0.024	67
D	3 x 48/17	42	2.4	0.017	52
E.	3 x 48/24	42	2.4	0.024	66
H.	3 x 48/20	42	2.4	0.020	60

2.3 Electrodes

The electrode process as described in the Third Interim Report has been continued. Recently, a support material from Stackpole Carbon Company has replaced the Union Carbide material previously used. The reason for this change was inability to secure a continuous supply of material from Union Carbide with uniform properties. After evaluation in small cell tests, the Stackpole material appeared to provide performance equal to that with the Union Carbide backing. Since the Stackpole material has been available in uniform quality and also produces stronger electrodes for easier handling, it has, for the present, become the electrode support of choice. A comparison of the two electrode support materials is shown in Table III.

3.0 STACK MANUFACTURE

Since the Third Interim Report, 28 stacks have been built and tested on this program. Of these, 5 were 35-cell stacks, and 23 were 10-cell stacks.

Most stacks in this series were built with 0.024 in. thick Kynol matrices, bipolar plates containing 20 - 26% PF resin, and standard electrodes, (see Section 2.3). Minor modifications to the assembly were incorporated in some stacks: these included a 1/4 in. wide, 0.005 in. thick tantalum shim over the anode ribs at the edges of the plate to prevent collapse of the electrode support into the anode grooves and to improve matrix compression over this area. This modification was used in all stacks from Build No.39 on.

Teflon film inserts 0.002 in. thick, were used over the seal areas of the air side of the plate in order to allow easier separation of cells should it become necessary to replace individual cells in a stack because of poor cell performance. This approach has, in fact, found to be workable, and individual cells were replaced successfully in several stacks without losing stack performance or gas tightness. The Teflon inserts were employed in all stacks from Build No. 34 on.

The electrodes, matrices, and plates were assembled in the conventional bipolar stack fashion as shown in Figure 1. Viton cement was applied in about 1/4" width around the periphery of the matrix to facilitate sealing. Component dimensions and stack test hardware remained unchanged since the previous progress reports (see pp. 11 - 15, Second Semi-Annual Report). The stack compression force existed by the tierods on the endplates was 8,000 lbs for both the 10- and the 35- cell stacks.

Two ten-cell stacks (nos. 34 and 37) were also built with 1 in. thick honeycomb end panels. These lightweight panels had phenolic core and skins with a 1/2" deep solid phenolic border for manifold bolt holes. These panels showed bowing during operation of the stacks possibly contributing to gas cross leak condition at the cell edges (there is no measurable bowing with the

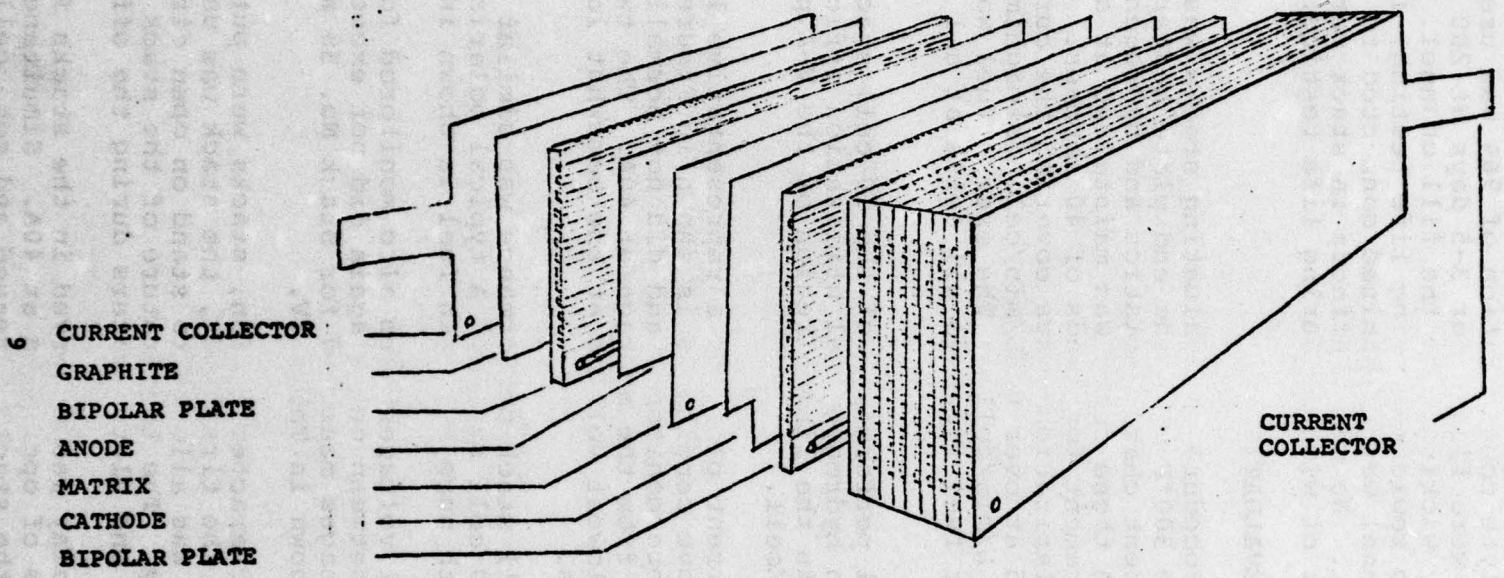
TABLE III

SUPPORT MATERIALS

	STACKPOLE	UNION CARBIDE
Thickness, typical (in.)	.018	.017
Thickness range (in.)	.016 - .020	.015 - .019
Weight typical (g/sq.ft.)	11.1	7.63
Weight range (g/sq.ft.)	10.6 - 13.5	5.7 - 7.9
Porosity (%)*	84.6	88.8

*Calculated from graphite density of 1.7 g/cm^3

FIGURE 1 STACK ASSEMBLY



3/4 in. solid s el endpanel.

A fill el rolyte conc ation of 96% was used for all stacks. The s s were fil for 3-5 days at 200 to 250°F in the usual fash by wicking m the fill channel. Occasionally, the stacks wer lso rewicke ring life testing; in this case, the electrolyte hannel was tained connected to a fill bottle containing 96% H_2SO_4. No ma effects in stack performance were observed as a ult of wick during life testing.

4.0 STACK EVALUATION

The stand procedure valuating stacks was to bring the stack temperat to 300°F w the end plate heaters and to determine voltage-current chara ristics and hydrogen utilization at 40A. Air flow in these te was maintained at about 10 times stoichimetric requirement for ads of 40 amperes. Fuel flow to the stack during polarization sts covering the current range of 5-80A was maintained at over 0. L/min/cell (stoichimetric requirement at 80A is 0.62 L/min/cell). The excess fuel was used to insure that sufficient fuel flow to all cells at all current densities.

Typical initial performa of the 10 cell stacks at 300°F was 6.0V at 40A with hydrogen el utilization efficiency over 90%. Polarization in the line region of the V-A plot was typically about 3 mV/A/cell.

The volta current plo r a representative 10 cell stack tested under the above condit s is shown in Figure 2. Individual cell voltages were monitored and did not normally show deviations of over 30 mV from the average at 40A. The two end cells usually showed the lowest voltage at the somewhat lower temperature for these cells.

Thirty-five cell stack performance was similar (on a per cell basis) to that of 10 cell sta s. A typical polarization curve obtained at 300 with pure h gen fuel is shown in Figure 3.

Individual cell voltages re also monitored for the 35 cell stack. Variations between cells again did not exceed 30mV at 40A. Individual cell voltages measured for Stack No. 58 at 300°F with a load of 40A are shown in Table IV.

After initial characteri ion, stacks were put on load at 40 amperes. During the first ek, the stack was usually operated for 8 hours/day and was allo to stand on open circuit for the remainder of the day. The t rature of the stack was maintained at 250-300°F by the end plate aters during the off-load period.

Load volta decay was o rved in the stacks following the first 10 to 50 urs of oper n at 40A. Simultaneously, hydrogen utilizatio n the stack reased and some cells began to

FIGURE 2 TEN-CELL STACK PERFORMANCE

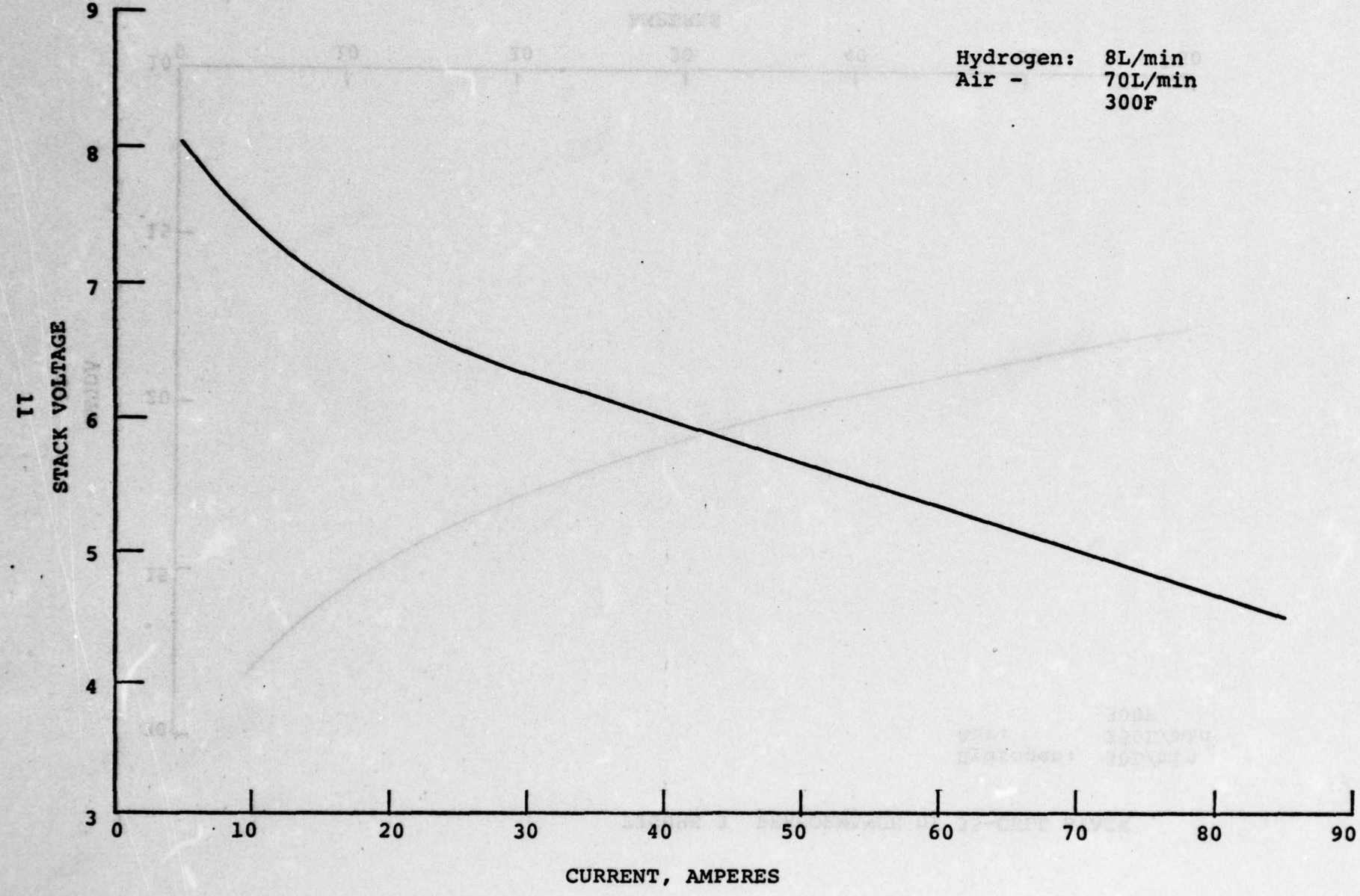


FIGURE 3 PERFORMANCE of 35-CELL STACK

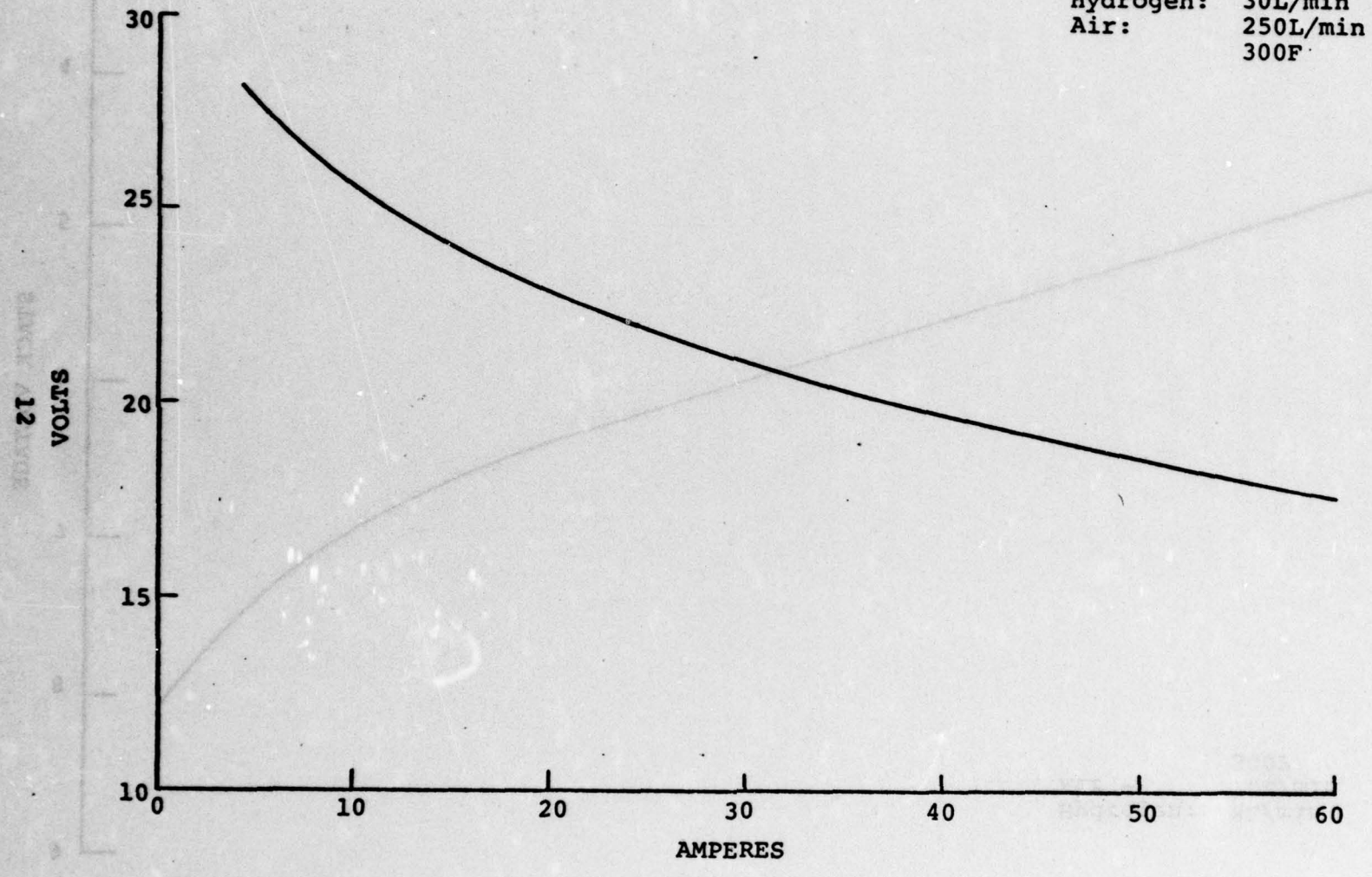


TABLE IV

CELL LOAD POTENTIALS, 35-CELL STACK

LOAD: 40A
TEMPERATURE: 320F
FUEL: Hydrogen

CELL NO.	VOLTAGE	CELL NO.	VOLTAGE
1	0.55	18	0.61
2	0.59	19	0.61
3	0.58	20	0.60
4	0.58		
5	0.59	21	0.61
		22	0.61
6	0.59	23	0.61
7	0.59	24	0.60
8	0.60	25	0.61
9	0.60		
10	0.61	26	0.61
		27	0.61
11	0.61	28	0.62
12	0.60	29	0.59
13	0.60	30	0.61
14	0.62		
15	0.60	31	0.60
		32	0.59
16	0.60	33	0.60
17	0.61	34	0.59
		35	0.57

exhibit variation in load voltage with full flow rate variations. This type of stack behavior is typical of a gas cross leak condition.

Disassembly and inspection of the stacks at the conclusion of testing at 40A revealed the plate corner condition described in Section 2.1.4. This appears to have been the major cause of stack degradation. Other degradation mechanisms, such as edge seal leaks, may also have contributed to performance decay.

In order to gain life data with the present components, one of the 10 cell stacks was continued on 40A load even after it had become evident that some gas cross leakage was occuring in the first four cells.* In order to maintain the performance at over 5.5 volts in this stack, hydrogen flow rates in excess of 150% of stoichimetric were generally employed. This stack had accumulated over 2500 hours by the end of this reporting period, with some decay in load voltage in the four cells in which gas cross-leakage was indicated, but with little decay in the remaining six cells (Figure 4). We believe that this data indicates a basic capability for all component materials employed in this stack to perform adequately over several thousand hours.

Four 10-cell stacks were delivered to MERADCOM as part of the contractual requirement. Voltage current data taken for these stacks before delivery are presented in Figures 5 - 8.

Stack assembly and test data for all 10- and 35-cell stacks built during this period are summarized in Tables V and VI.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It appears at the present time that the difficulties encountered with stack performance are associated with deterioration of the bipolar plates, and with lack of gas tightness of both the intercell and manifolds seals.

Steps are now being taken to correct the plate degradation condition thru composition and process modifications. It does appear that the PF resins now being used will be suitable in this application if plate porosity can be eliminated.

A need to further study the sealing methods is indicated. This will be done by building and testing short (2-3 cells) stacks. Assembly of the remaining 10- and 35-cell stacks will be resumed upon development of a reliable sealing technique.

* A numbering convention has been established at ERC whereby cells are numbered starting at the anode (negative) side of the stack.

FIGURE 4 POLARIZATION TEST, STACK 17 (CELLS 5-10)

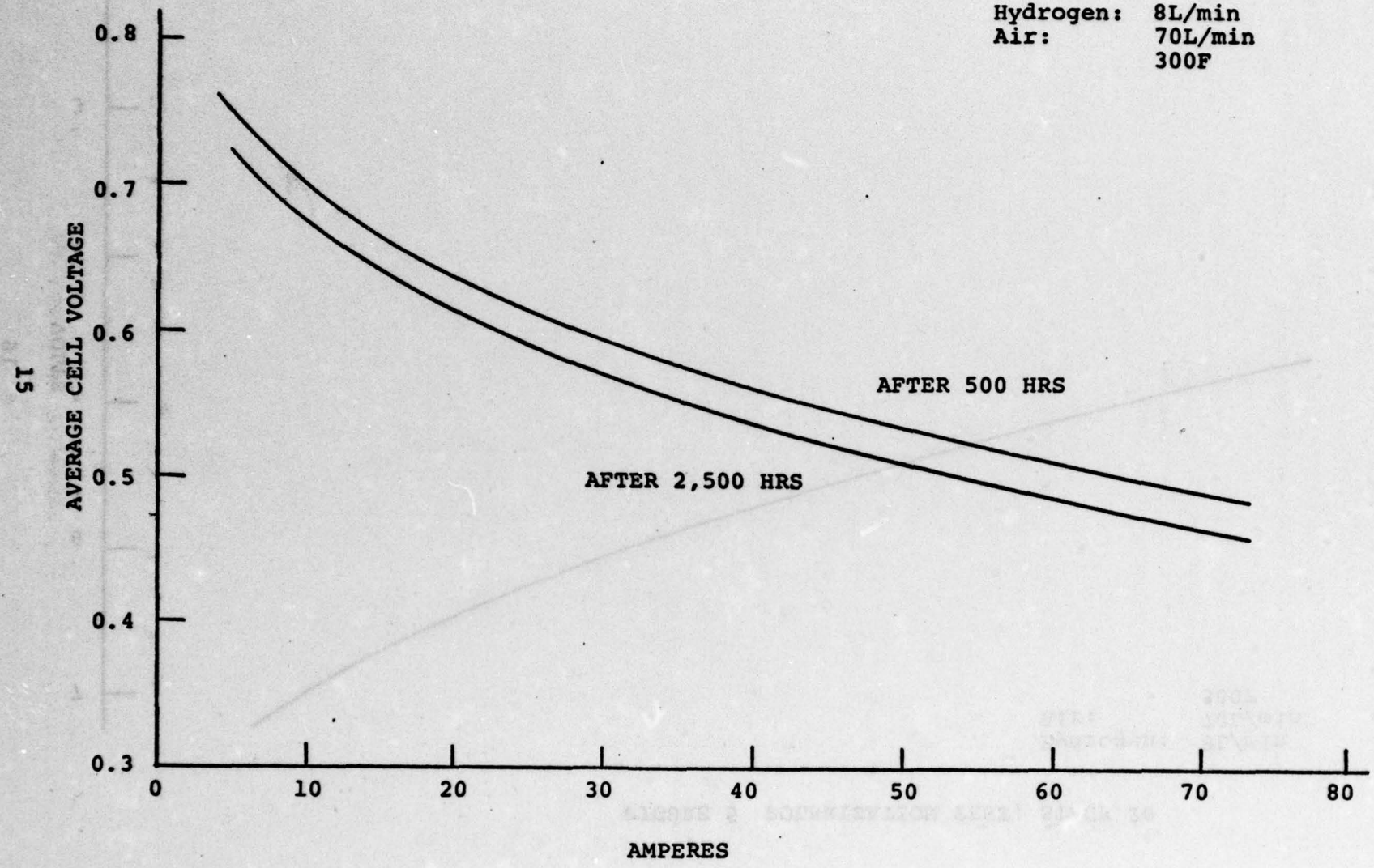


FIGURE 5 POLARIZATION TEST, STACK 20

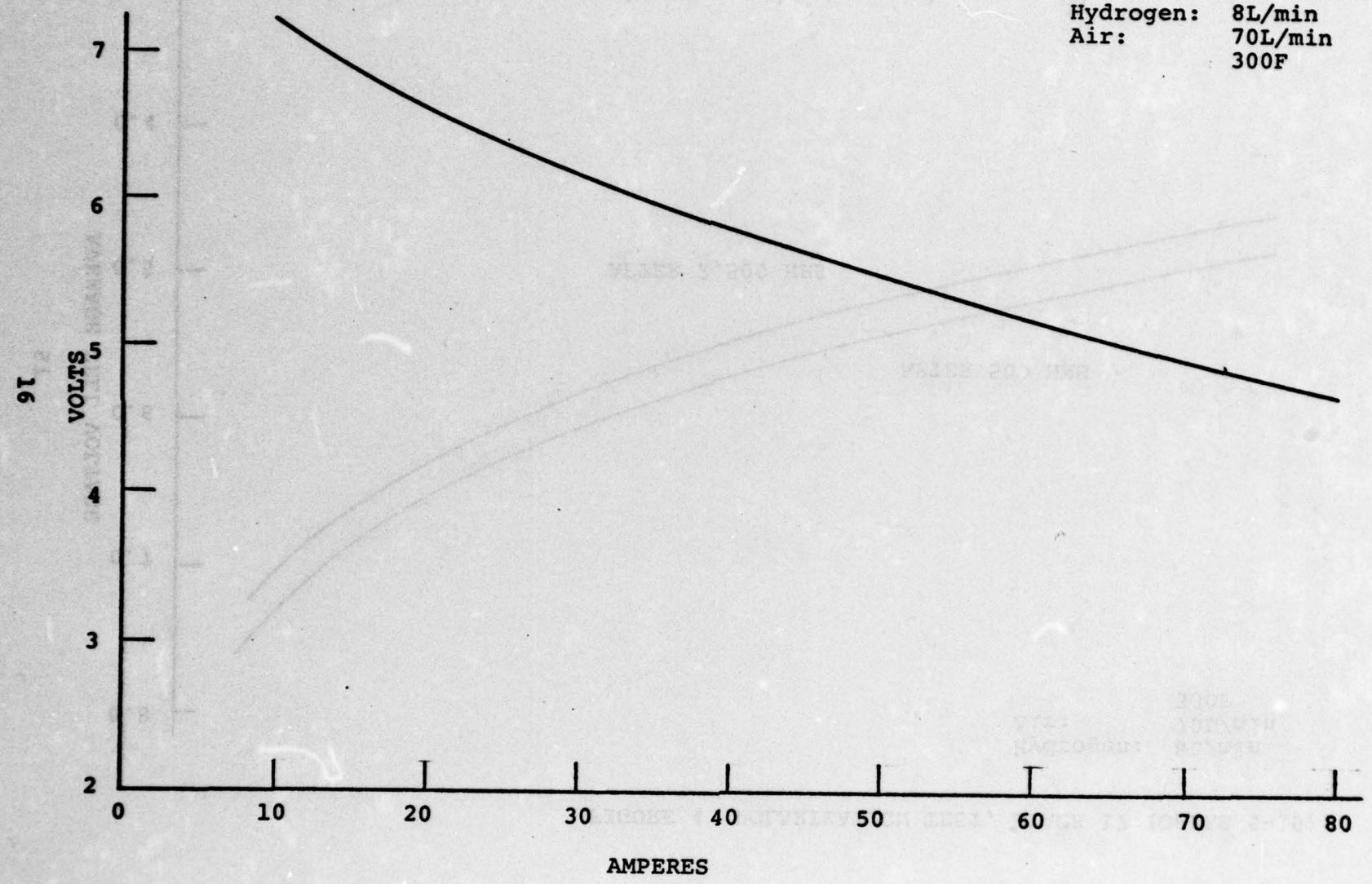


FIGURE 6 POLARIZATION TEST, STACK 25

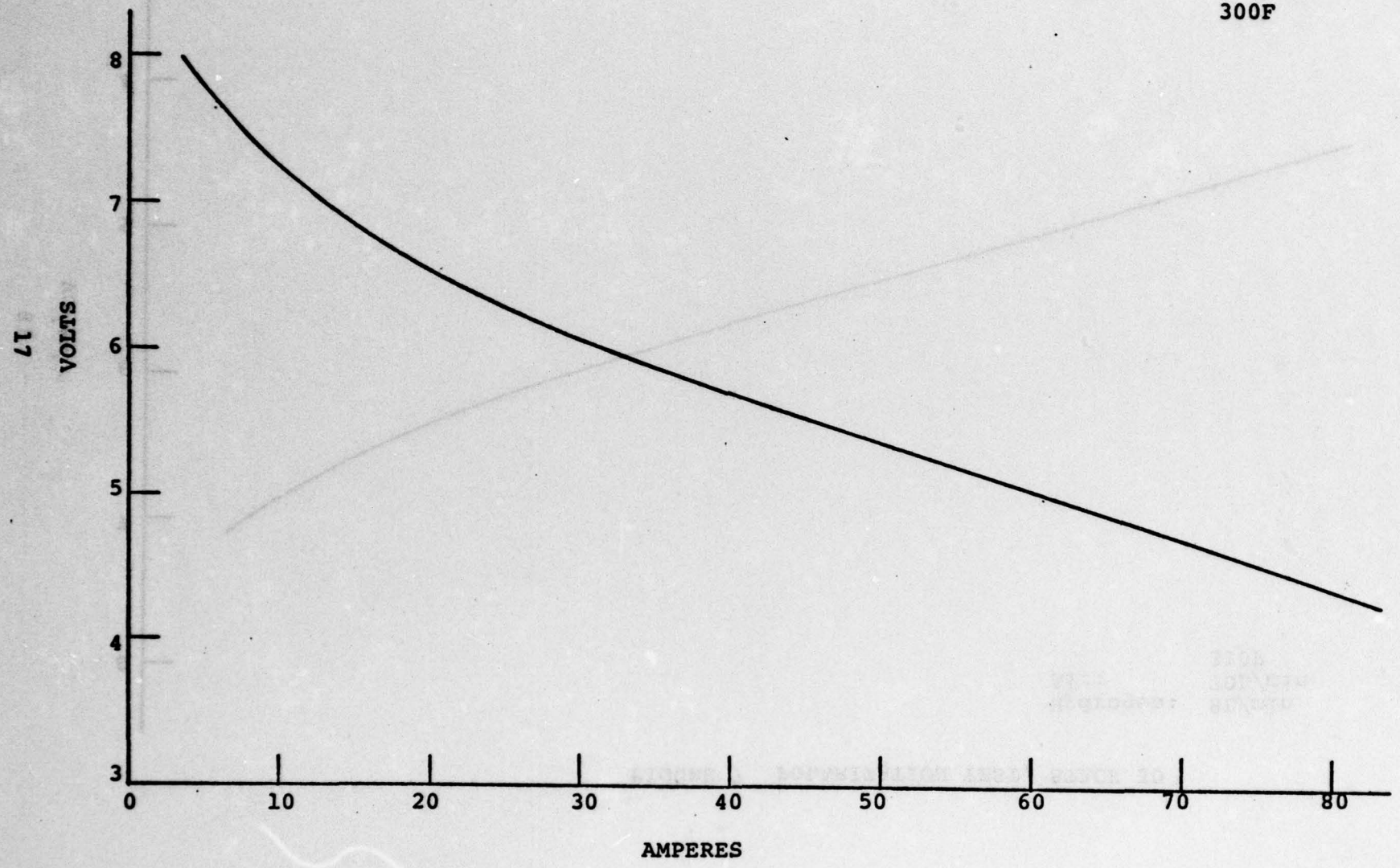


FIGURE 7 POLARIZATION TEST, STACK 30

Hydrogen: 8L/min
Air: 70L/min
310F

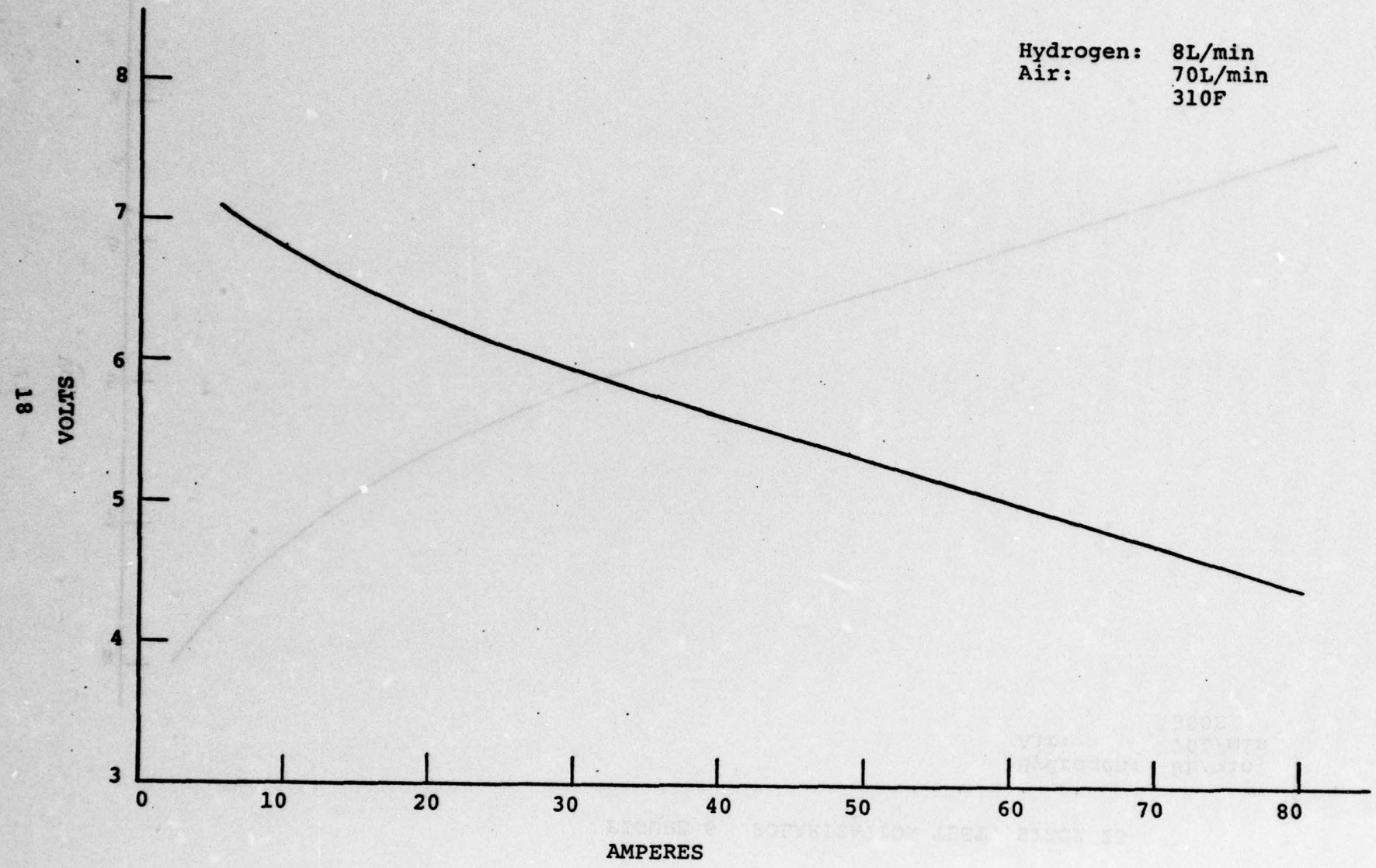


FIGURE 8 POLARIZATION TEST, STACK 35

Hydrogen: 8L/min
Air: 70L/min
300F

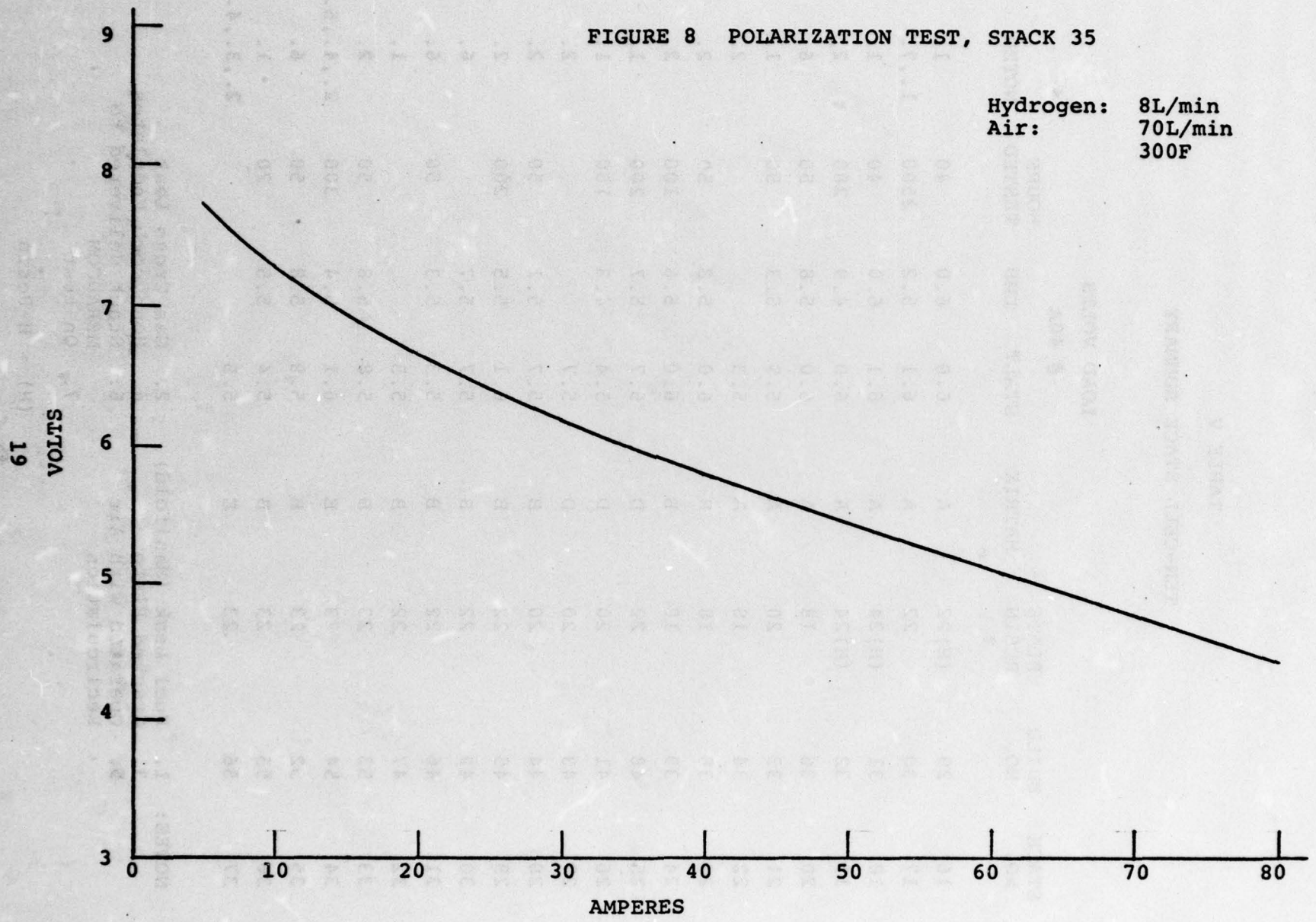


TABLE V

TEN-CELL STACK SUMMARY

STACK NO.	BUILD NO.	PLATE RESIN %	MATRIX	LOAD VOLTS @ 40A START	LOAD VOLTS @ 40A END	HOURS TESTED	NOTES
16	29	(H)22	A	6.0	6.0	40	1.
17	30	22	A	6.1	5.2	2500	1.,7.
18	31	(H)24	A	6.1	6.0	40	1.
19	32	(H)24	A	6.0	4.9	280	2.
20	36	18	A	6.0	5.8	50	6.
21	33	20	A	5.9	5.3	50	1.
22	34	18	A	5.3			2.
23	38	18	B	6.0	5.8	50	2.
24	39	18	B	6.0	5.6	100	2.
25	48	22	D	5.7	5.7	200	1.
26	41	20	D	5.4	4.3	100	1.
27	43	20	D	5.7			2.
28	44	20	B	5.7	5.1	50	2.
29	45	22	B	6.1	5.5	200	2.
30	49	22	B	5.7	5.7		6.
31	46	22	B	5.3	5.3	50	6.
32	47	22	B	5.5			1.
33	53	23	B	5.8	5.8	50	2.
34	54	23	E	6.1	5.4	300	2.,4.,5.
35	52	23	B	5.8	5.8	50	6.
36	55	23	B	5.4	5.5	20	1.
37	56	23	E	5.5			2.,3.,4.

NOTES:
1. Fuel Leak (Manifold)
2. Gas Cross Leak
3. Cracked Plate
4. Honeycomb Endplates
5. Operated with Air Recirculation
6. Stack delivered to MERADCOM
7. On test

(H) = H-Resin

TABLE VI

35-CELL STACK SUMMARY

STACK NO.	BUILD NO.	PLATE RESIN %	MATRIX	LOAD VOLTS @ 40A START	LOAD VOLTS @ 40A END	HOURS TESTED	NOTES
1	50	22	D	21.0	19.1	20	1.,2.
2	51	23	D	19.6		10	2.
3	57	23	D	19.9		10	1.,2.
4	58	24	D	20.5		10	3.
5	60	24	D & H	20.5		10	3.

NOTES: 1. Fuel Leak (Manifold) 2. Gas Cross Leak

3. On test

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US Army Tank Automotive R&D Command
Technical Library/DRDTA-UL
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Fort Monmouth, NJ 07703

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Engineering Command
ATTN: Research Directorate
Fort Eustis, VA 23604

Chief of Research & Development (1)
Office, Chief of Staff
Department of the Army
Washington, DC 20310

Chief (1)
US Army Security Agency
Arlington Hall Station
Arlington, VA 22212

Office of the Assistant Secretary (1)
of Defense (Research & Engineering)
ATTN: ASS'T DIRECTOR (E&PS)
The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20310

Office of Assistant Director (1)
Defense Research & Engineering
ATTN: Col G.D. McPherson
Pentagon
Washington, DC 20310

Power Information Center (1)
University City Science Institute
3624 Science Center
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Institute of Defense Analysis (1)
400 Army-Navy Drive
ATTN: Mr. Robert Hamilton
Arlington, VA 22202

Director (1)
National Aeronautics & Space
Administration
ATTN: RPN (Mr. H. Schwartz)
Washington, DC 20546

Director (1)
George Marshall Space Flight Center
ATTN: Mr. J. Miller (EC-12)
Huntsville, Alabama 38809

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Aerospace Power Division
ATTN: AFAPL/PO (Mr. G. Sherman)
Wright-Patterson Air Force Base
Dayton, OH 45443

Director (1)
Lewis Research Center
National Aeronautics & Space
Administration
ATTN: (M.S. 309-1)
21000 Brook Park Road
Cleveland, OH 44135

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Department of the Air Force (AFSC)
Rome Air Development Center
ATTN: TUGG, (Mr. F. Mollura, 3068)
Griffiss AFB, NY 13441

Commanding Officer (1)
AFEWC (SURP)
San Antonio, TX 78241

Chief (1)
Naval Ships Engineering Center
Department of the Navy
ATTN: Code 5157D, Mr. Albert Himy
Hyattsville, MD 20782

Director, Power Branch (1)
Office of Naval Research
ATTN: 473
800 N. Quincy Street
Arlington, VA 22217

Chief (1)
Naval Ship Systems Command
Department of the Navy
ATTN: Code: 03422
Washington, DC 20360

Commanding Officer (1)
Naval Ordnance Test Station
China Lake, CA 93555

Commander (1)
Naval Electronics Laboratory Center
ATTN: Research Library
San Diego, CA 92152

Director (1)
US Naval Research Laboratory
ATTN: Code 2027
Washington, DC 20390

Commanding Officer (1)
Naval Ship R&D Center
Annapolis Division
ATTN: Mr. John H. Harrison
Annapolis, MD 21402

Technical Documents Center (2)
MERADCOM
Fort Belvoir, VA 22060

Arthur D. Tevebaugh, Director (1)
Coal Technology Programs
Argonne National Laboratory
Bldg 205
9700 South Cass Avenue
Argonne, IL 60439

Dr. Paul C. Milner (1)
Room 1D-259
Bell Telephone Laboratories
Murray Hill, NJ 07974

Electrochimica Corporation (1)
2485 Charleston Road
ATTN: Technical Library
Mountain View, CA 94040

Engelhard Industries Division (1)
Engelhard Minerals & Chemicals Corp
Government Services Dept.
430 Mountain Avenue
ATTN: V.A. Forlenza
Murray Hill, NJ 07974

Mr. George Ciprios (1)
Exxon Research & Engineering
PO Box 8
Linden, NJ 07036

General Electric Company (1)
50 Fordham Road
ATTN: L.J. Nuttall
Applications Engineer
Bldg 1A
Wilmington, MA 01887

L.G. Marianowski (1)
Manager, Energy Conversion & Storage
Research
Institute of Gas Technology
3424 S. State Street
Chicago, IL 60616

Massachusetts Institute of
Technology (1)
ATTN: Professor H.P. Meissner
Cambridge, MA 02138

P.L. Howard Associates, Inc. (1)
Millington, MD 21561

Power Systems Division (1)
United Technologies Corporation
PO Box 109
Governor's Highway
South Windsor, CN 06074

The Standard Oil Company (1)
Research Center
4440 Warrensville Center Road
ATTN: Dr. Robert A. Rightmire
Cleveland, OH 44128

Science Applications, Inc. (1)
ATTN: Dr. Herbert P. Silverman
1200 Prospect Street
PO Box 2351
La Jolla, CA 92038

U.C.L.A. (1)
Dept. of Chemical Engineering
ATTN: Prof. D. Bennion
Los Angeles, CA 90007

Union Carbide Corporation (1)
Parma Research Center
PO Box 6166
ATTN: Dr. R. Brodd
Parma, OH 44101

University of Florida (1)
Department of Chemical Engineering
PO Box 3027
ATTN: Professor R.D. Walker
Gainesville, Florida 32601

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ATTN: Corporate Research
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Milwaukee, WI 53201

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US Department of Transportation
Transportation Systems Center
55 Broadway
Cambridge, MA 02142

Dr. R.T. Foley (1)
Chemistry Department
The American University
Washington, DC 20016

Dr. S. B. Brummer (1)
Director of Physical Research
EIC, Inc.
55 Chapel Street
Newton, MA 02158

Commanding Officer (1)
Harry Diamond Laboratories
AMXDO-RCB,ATTN: Dr. Benderly
Washington, D.C. 20438

Director, Technical Information (1)
Advanced Research Projects Agency
1400 Wilson Blvd
Arlington, VA 22209

Dr. D. C. Olson (1)
Shell Development
PO Box 1380
Houston, TX 77001

Dr. R.A. Wynveen (1)
President
Life Systems, Inc.
24755 Highpoint Road
Cleveland, OH 44122

Electric Power Research Institute (1)
ATTN: A.P. Fickett
P.O. Box 10412
Palo Alto, CA 94304

State University of New York at
Buffalo (1)
ATTN: Professor Stanley Bruckenstein
Acheson Hall, SUNY/AB
Buffalo, NY 14214

Dr. Ralph Roberts (1)
Energy Resources & Environmental
Systems Engineering
The MITRE Corp, Mail Stop W-389
Westgate Research Park
McLean, VA 22101

Universal Oil Products, Inc. (1)
Ten UOP Plaza
ATTN: Stephen N. Massie
Government Contract Administrator
Des Plaines, IL 60016

Technology Center (1)
ESB Incorporated
19 W College Avenue
ATTN: Dr. D.T. Ferrell, Jr.
Yardley, PA 19067

Dr. Douglas N. Bennion (1)
Energy & Kinetics Department
School of Engineering & Applied Science
5532 Boelter Hall
Unviersity of California
Los Angeles, CA 90024

Commanding Officer (1)
Marine Corps Development & Education
Center
ATTN: M&L Division (M. Horstkamp)
Quantico, VA 22134


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